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ABSTRACT

This paper considers whether ethnicity is a social construction that is constantly being recreated in a nexus of shifting social relations rather than a set of perceptions and behaviors that remain constant and stem from a youth's membership in an ethnic group. Student responses about ethnicity from a larger study of student role and engagement in school provided impetus for this research, which used case studies of 10 students in urban high schools in California. The students, freshmen when the study began, include: (1) four Mexican American females; (2) two Vietnamese immigrant females; (3) two African American males; (4) one Italian American male; and (5) one Anglo American female. Semistructured interviews, school and classroom observations, and analyses of student records provide information about student experiences of ethnicity. The case studies support the view that what happens in schools does affect students' senses of themselves and their identities. The meaning of ethnicity is constantly renegotiated as students interact with teachers and peers in classrooms and at home. This research also suggests that teachers can work positively with youth who experience racism. There is a 29-item bibliography. (SLD)

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THE FLOW OF ETHNICITY:
VOICES OF DIVERSE HIGH SCHOOL YOUTH

Ann Locke Davidson, Hanh Thanh Cao, Patricia K. Phelan

If you ask Johnnie what it means to be a brother, he will say it means different things in different places. In a St. Louis middle school, being a brother means juvenile hall, gang banging, failing to graduate from high school and unemployment. In a California urban high school, it means something different. Speaking black English and rapping go alongside doing well in school, taking pride in making the honor roll and planning for college.

What can we learn from Johnnie's strikingly different notions of his ethnicity? Do school and teacher practices play into youths' conceptions of their ethnic selves? Or, are external forces - family, cultural, economic and political - so overwhelming that what happens in schools is rendered meaningless? This paper delves into these questions by focussing on how the meaning and practice of ethnic identity shape and are shaped by school and classroom experiences.

Over the past 20 years, scholars studying the relationship between ethnicity and schooling have focussed overwhelmingly on external forces, e.g. cultural practices, group perceptions of labor market opportunities, as determining a person's sense of ethnicity. In trying to understand this relationship, most of these analysts have assumed a classic notion of culture, in which the meanings and behaviors associated with a specific cultural background are viewed as relatively fixed, homogeneous and uniformly shared. Students of color, therefore, enter school with a stable sense of ethnic identity, which exerts a constant influence on their academic work until they leave. Schools are simply stages on which set patterns are played out.

Cultural difference theorists, for example, show that minority children's home lives are different from but as functional as those of white middle-class children. These scholars challenge cultural deficit theory, which postulates that minority and working-class children's low academic achievement results from failed community and home socialization. (Bereiter & Engelmann 1966; Deutsch et al. 1967) They argue rather that cultural differences produce systematic and recurrent miscommunication in the classroom. Focussing on differences in communicative style such as participation structures (Erickson & Mohatt 1982; Philips 1972), learning style (Heath 1982), and cognitive style (Ramirez & Casteneda 1974), these scholars show how miscommunication is a potential source of academic failure.

Later labor market theorists look to political, economic and historical factors to explain the relationship between ethnicity and educational achievement. (Fordham & Ogbu 1986; Gibson 1987; Matute-Bianchi 1986; Ogbu 1987; Suarez-Orozco 1987) They criticize cultural difference theories first, for their failure to explain the academic success of some minority groups, and second, for their assumption that cultural differences are necessarily problematic, despite the fact that people in cross-cultural situations typically develop bicultural competencies. (O'Connor 1989) These scholars argue that the nature of the history, subordination, and exploitation of a group affects the meanings that group members attach to cultural differences. Further, these meanings affect schooling; for example, groups with a longer history of subordination develop an oppositional ethnic identity in which succeeding in school is viewed as selling out to one's oppressors.

Both cultural difference and labor market theories, which focus on the relationship of outside forces to human action, broaden our understanding of how ethnicity affects schooling. Cultural difference theorists direct our attention to the fact that behavioral

and linguistic differences are a potential source of conflict and/or inequitable treatment in the classroom. Labor market theorists demonstrate that the meanings given to ethnic identity play an important role in a youth's engagement with schooling. However, these lines of research often portray teachers and schools as figures surrounded and overwhelmed by students whose actions and perceptions are predetermined by outside structures. In this paper, we critique this implication that day-to-day social interaction is a mere forum through which institutionally-produced social or psychological elements bring about given forms of human behavior. Furthermore, we argue that an individual's sense of ethnic self and identity are negotiated across time and social situations, rather than received.

I. Theoretical Background

During the last decade, anthropologists increasingly have turned their attention to indigenous notions of self and person, arguing that these notions are largely a reflection of cultural context. These authors suggest that notions of self vary across sociocultural systems (Geertz 1973; Rosaldo 1980; White & Kirkpatrick 1985) as well as more specific contexts, such as work and family settings. (Kondo 1990, Spindler and Spindler 1989) In short, self is not necessarily private and constant, but rather is formed and reformed, over time, in connection with others. Such ideas remind us that individual notions of "I" are tied to experiences within social and institutional realms.

More recently, anthropological scholars and writers of color have challenged classic conceptions of culture, which emphasize common patterns and shared meanings. They point out that this emphasis, while useful in some situations, fails to deal with the inconsistencies, conflicts and contradictions that are a part of life in increasingly global societies. Such theorists conceive of culture in a global society as a set of multiple

border zones which demand flux, negotiation and improvisation. Cultural meanings and practices are dynamic - shifting and often conflictual. (Clifford 1988; Rosaldo 1989, Spindler & Spindler 1990)

Such theorists conceive of ethnicity as a flexible, socially constructed reality. Ethnic identity is constantly recreated, coming forward or retreating to the background in response to the politics and relations which characterize changing social situations. (Clifford 1988; Roosens 1989) Ethnic self, which refers to an orientation or orientations towards one's ethnic being, depends on how the individual reacts and responds to a range of cultural and intercultural phenomena. Ethnic identity, which refers to the presentation of one's ethnicity in a social matrix in a way that significant others accept and recognize, depends on how an individual or individuals mediate a range of cultural and intercultural phenomena to establish themselves. For example, individuals moving through multicultural environments may create multiplex personal identities, showing a "gift for improvisation and recombination within an array of disparate cultural elements..." (Rosaldo: 215) Or, "...the new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be Indian in Mexican culture, Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures...." (Anzaldua 1987:79)

Our research draws upon the theoretical orientations of these scholars. We consider the voices and experiences of six high school youth to add to growing evidence that ethnic self and identity are flexible, socially constructed conceptions. The following questions have guided our inquiry. First, how are youths' experiences of their ethnicity shaped by school and classroom contexts? Second, what factors within these contexts

enable or constrain students' abilities to resist negative self-definitions, to engage in school, and to assert their ethnic backgrounds?

II. The Study: Design and Methods

This study is embedded in a larger project being carried out at the Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching (CRC) at Stanford University. The "Students' Multiple Worlds" project[1] (Phelan et al. 1991) focuses on identifying, from the student's perspective, factors which impact engagement with the school community and the student role. Initial interviews about classroom and school environments indicate that the meaning students attribute to their ethnicity within schools plays an important role in how they feel about their school experiences. Further we observed that students conceive of and practice their ethnic identity differently over time and across school and classroom contexts.

Student descriptions inspired further research on students' experience of ethnicity. We selected ten students in two urban high schools for in-depth case studies. Four are Mexican-American females - of these one is an immigrant, two are children of immigrants, and one a child of parents born in this country. Two are Vietnamese immigrant females, two are African-American males, one is male Italian-American and one female Anglo-American. The students were freshmen when the study began.

The high schools which these students attend lie close to one another in a middle-class residential neighborhood, and are part of a district with a rapidly growing minority population of primarily Latino and Vietnamese immigrants. With court-ordered desegregation in 1986, both schools have experienced striking change in their student populations. Between 1985 and 1990, minority enrollment increased from 18.2 to 58 percent at Explorer High School, with 36 percent eligible for the district transportation

program, and from 21.9 to 50 percent at Huntington High School, with 19 percent of these students eligible for the district transportation program.

The findings reported here are based on four semi-structured interviews with each student, school and classroom observations, and analyses of student record data. Students' conceptions of their ethnicity, their feelings about school and classroom contexts, and family and peer relationships were the major foci of the interviews. Classroom observations, conducted bi-weekly at each of the schools, supplement students' comments about teacher behaviors and provide insights about how students present their ethnic identity outside of interview situations. We have attended classes, gone to lunch, and spent time with the students and their friends during passing periods and after school hours.

III. Notions of Ethnic Identity

For the ten youth in this study, ethnic self and identity are malleable, influenced by wider societal images, community and school experiences. Despite this complex array of forces, we find patterns in youths' conception and practice of their ethnic identities which reflect school experiences as well as external forces. This paper highlights three of these patterns. First, some students experience their ethnicity as a fortress which both protects and entraps them. These youth maintain and defend their ethnic selves from external forces they perceive as threatening. They present an oppositional identity which excludes academic or social aspects of schooling. Second, some students experience their ethnicity as a resource. Students who reflect this pattern see their ethnic self as an integral, powerful resource which enables their success in what they view as a racist society. These students may also present an oppositional ethnic identity, but in their case opposition implies succeeding academically. These students thrust their ethnic

selves forward to varying degrees and draw on practices from other cultural systems to meet their needs in various contexts. Third, youth experience their ethnicity as a place from which they move in and out. For these students, ethnicity has situational value. They protect their ethnic selves, switching from home-cultural patterns of interaction to those of the majority culture within clearly defined social contexts.

Ethnicity as a Fortress

For youth who perceive the boundary between their school and community worlds as politically and/or emotionally impassible, ethnicity is seen as both supportive and entrapping. These students maintain their ethnicity as a fortress, retreating from cultural borderlands - academic or social - within the school. As illustrated in the following cases, such students, similar to the involuntary minorities portrayed in Ogbu's work (1987), present an oppositional identity, reaffirming and redefining their ethnic self in terms which oppose the majority culture.

Sonia Gonzales

Sonia, a sophomore at Explorer High School, speaks proudly of her upper-class Mexican heritage and the value her Mexican community places on family and friendship. She and her friends have a strong commitment to maintaining their language, and are fiercely critical of Mexican students who hide their ability to speak Spanish or otherwise appear to deny their culture. Her pride and commitment are strengthened by her parents, both who were born in Mexico:

> Our family, all of our family is like always into Mexican stuff. Like we're always talking about going to Mexico, we're always talking about going to Mexican parties, everything, all, everything. Any free chance we get, any vacations, we want to go to Mexico. (EX56STEN: 59-67)[2]

Sonia's friends, mostly immigrant and first-generation, prefer to speak Spanish, prefer Mexican music, prefer cruising in their "barrio" to attending school events, such as dances or games.

While proud of her Mexican heritage, Sonia describes her ethnicity in collective terms that reflect both her oppression and subsequent opposition to the majority culture. For Sonia, being Mexican means engaging in a set of "crazy" behaviors which are at odds with majority society and detrimental to her personal future. Craziness - which Sonia equates with the Mexican way of thinking and defines as acting on the spur of the moment contrary to the wishes of authorities - implies academic failure, teen pregnancy and juvenile hall:

> It's like - I don't know, but Mexicans are more crazier than white people. It's - we have like different kinds of thinking I guess, I don't know. Like we want to do everything, it's like - they [white people] take everything slowly you know...and I don't know, it's just that they think about the future more and stuff. And us, you know what happens, happens. And it's just meant to happen. And it's like - we do crazy things, and we never think about the consequences that might happen. When we do something, than after we did it we think about it. And we go 'Oh no! We did something bad we really screwed up this time....'
>
> And like white people over here in this area right here, like everything's more quiet, more serious, you know. You don't see like - it's really rare to see a teenager pregnant, it's like more Mexican and black people are the ones that come out pregnant. And you don't see like white people screwing around. And when you go to Juvenile, you never see like a white person in there, cause they have their act together and Mexicans, they just tend to screw around all the time.
>
> ....it's - you know, right now I'm young and I like to have fun and everything. But later on, when I get older, the consequences will - they'll probably - when I'm older. Right now, it's like if I keep on acting the way I am, I don't know what I'm going to do. End up in the streets, sweeping floors. I don't want to do that, and maybe if I get my act together, I'll go to college, you know. (EX56STB: 965-982, 1005-1017)

With "screwing up" and "screwing around" being equated with being Mexican, "having your act together" equated with being white, Sonia's sense of ethnic self reflects an internalization of roles and an acceptance of the status quo that some scholars refer to as internalized oppression. (Gaventa 1980)

Yet Sonia's conception of her ethnic identity, growing largely out of her experiences with her "Sureno" gang peers, is also collective and oppositional. The Surenos embrace several smaller, neighborhood gangs oriented towards the preservation of Mexican language and culture. To be popular among the Surenos requires that youth back their pro-Mexican orientation with craziness, which can include school failure, breaking laws, and turning anger and frustration towards more acculturated ("Norteno") Chicano gang peers. Vigil, in his research on Latino gangs, has found a similar premium placed on craziness ("locura"), which he defines as "a state of mind in which various quasi-controlled actions denoting a type of craziness or wildness occur." (1988:438)) In being crazy - in failing academically and breaking the laws of the majority society - the Surenos resist and attack forces which pressure them to assimilate; in attacking their more-acculturated Norteno peers the Surenos attack the physical embodiment of these pressures.

In short, by practicing crazy behavior, Sonia gains popularity in a peer group that fights for her right to her ethnic self. Her hunger to be included in the popular Mexican peer group, and the subsequent practice of an oppositional ethnic identity, affect her academic performance. Through eighth grade, Sonia was an above average student. Her grades have dropped dramatically at Explorer High School. During her freshman year, she failed four out of five academic classes; during the first semester of her sophomore year, she failed to pass any. Sonia rarely does assigned work, even when

given time within class to do so. She is frequently tardy or absent, skipping whole days of school to go to parties with her friends. She is known and teased affectionately by fellow students for setting a less than ideal example as a student. Nevertheless, Sonia has internalized many of the beliefs of the dominant society about the connection between education and opportunity. Sonia's mother is also concerned about her daughter's plummeting grades and urges Sonia to improve her school performance as an example to her younger sister. She reminds Sonia frequently that she is destroying her future.

Peer group affiliation and loyalty to peer definitions of Mexican identity, however, outweigh Sonia's personal beliefs about education or her parents' hopes for her future. Feeling caught between being labelled a school girl or popularity and reaffirmation of her ethnic identity, Sonia chooses the latter.

Andrea Cao

While coming from a radically different background, Andrea Cao's experience of her ethnic identity is similar to Sonia's. A sophomore who arrived in the United States from Vietnam seven years ago, Andrea also attends Explorer High School. Like Sonia, Andrea and her friends explicitly acknowledge the value of their heritage, speak Vietnamese to one another, and are critical of their more acculturated Vietnamese peers:

> ...I know every single Vietnamese in the school. But not - well there's like three Vietnamese I don't know. They play with Americans so they...so they mostly don't know how to speak Vietnamese. So I don't go talk to them and stuff. So I say 'OK, forget it' and we hate them too. I don't know why, you know, but they're like a traitor or something. I like to play with American, but they hate Vietnamese so we hate them. (EX48STB: 1308-1324)

Besides encouraging one another to maintain their language as well as what they describe as traditional Vietnamese beliefs - most prominently a high regard for education and respect for authority - Andrea and her friends also protect each other from verbal or physical attacks by other ethnic groups. Finally, this peer group generates alternative forms of social interaction, such as roller skating, picnics, and trips to Vietnamese-oriented shopping malls.

Andrea conceives of her ethnicity as a barrier which excludes social interaction with students from outside her cultural group. For Andrea, who speaks nostalgically of her childhood in Vietnam, being Vietnamese implies superior beliefs and behaviors - such as placing friendship before status, not showing off - which sustain her socially and emotionally:

> Well when I talk to a Vietnamese I get very - I'm comfortable when I talk to them. And American...I don't know sometimes. You know how they want to be popular? And so when they see some of their friends and some of their popular friends they just forget you. And that's not how with Vietnamese. If they forget you like they 'Oh, is that where you were?' (EX48STEN: 463-473)

At the same time, Andrea sees her ethnicity as preventing the social validation from white Americans that she desires:

> I would like it if American boys - the cute ones - would ask me to go somewhere, you know? Not that I can go, but... (JUST ASK ANYWAY, HUH?) Yes. I guess I just want them to ask me, you know? Like go to the Valentine's dance, I would like it if they ask me. Like a cute guy would ask me...if he likes me he would ask me. And I don't think that would be possible. None - none - Mexican or American will. (EX48STEN: 2042-2057)

Andrea's strong sense of ethnic self, than, is combined with a feeling that this ethnic self will inexorably by rejected by her white classmates.

Out of this sense of self Andrea creates a defensive ethnic identity which prevents her from interacting at more than a superficial level with those that have a different sense of their ethnicity than herself. Time out of the classroom is spent exclusively with other Vietnamese students with whom she speaks only Vietnamese. At the same time, Andrea and her friends' respect for authority requires that they practice quiet separatism rather than openly criticize or resist the activity that they see around them:

> We try to act like Americans. Not try to act like it, but we try to be as comfortable as we can because we live in America and we have to get along with the people....And so we just stay in a group of our own....It's just that we feel comfortable in a group. But we don't do anything wrong...(EX48STEN: 588-604)

However, there are indications that this separatist strategy is changing to one which is more openly antagonistic. During their freshman year, Andrea and her friends helped and exerted friendly pressure on each other to succeed in school, most days going to the library at lunch time to do homework and to solicit help from a Vietnamese tutor. During their sophomore year, they have begun to skip classes and to socialize during lunch, and Andrea does not do homework. While pro-academic behavior enabled Andrea to earn a 3.36 grade point average (GPA) during her freshman year, her GPA fell to a 1.67 by the second semester of her sophomore year.

Tension and Anonymity: Containing the Flow of Ethnicity

Clearly, Sonia's and Andrea's sense of their ethnicity floods their lives, constraining their movements within school settings. Both are enmeshed in a nexus of relationships that encourage a defensive ethnic identity. Certainly, Sonia and Andrea's experiences are closely tied to their peer groups whose members define their ethnicity in terms which are a response to societal images and pressures. Yet, they and their peers are responding, as well, to relationships within school and classroom contexts.

In Sonia's case, district policy unwittingly reaffirms schisms between Latino students and provides basic conditions which reinforce Sureno gang membership and loyalty. Explorer is the district designated school for immigrant Spanish speakers. As such, it has gained a reputation in the Mexican youth culture as a school for Surenos. Surenos view Explorer as a school where they can solidify their strength and recruit new members; recent immigrants can be recruited easily because of their pro-Mexico orientation and the feelings of oppression they experience within their school environment (see below). Indeed, according to Sonia and students at neighboring schools, the Surenos have succeeded in driving Nortenos and those who sympathize openly with them away from or into hiding at Explorer[3].

Recruitment to oppositional groups - be they openly rebellious, in Sonia's case, or quietly separatist, as in Andrea's case - is fostered by the general level of tension between Explorer's white students and those of color. Both Andrea and Sonia perceive little support and even direct hostility from their white peers. Sonia's and Andrea's voices reflect the discomfort they feel when crossing ethnic boundaries at Explorer High School:

> Sonia: Cause you feel uncomfortable in a class that - you know, there's practically no Mexicans in there, so nobody you can talk to. And then the people in there, they're like really stuck up, you know. It makes it uncomfortable to be in that class cause they're like -you feel like they're talking about you or something. It's uncomfortable cause they're like stuck up, they don't like talking to you. You might say hi or hello and sometimes they don't answer back. And that's what I don't like, you know. (EX56STB: 855-874)

> Andrea: I just do the same thing as all the Vietnamese, I don't go - cause all the Americans do - like on the grass. All the Americans hang around the clock, and then like the Vietnamese just hang around the grass there. We never go - we hate [it] when we walk in the Mexican and American [areas] because what they do is they - they don't laugh at us, you know, but they like when we say [something] in Vietnamese [they laugh]. And I say 'Fuck- '

> ....you know, I want to say the word [Fuck you], but then they don't say [come out] and I say 'Ohh, get out of my life!' or something. (EX48STB: 1010-1048)

Sonia's and Andrea's wariness of and even direct hostility towards students unlike themselves are echoed by most of the Mexican and Vietnamese students in our sample. Likewise, white students talk of their fear and hostility towards their Mexican peers.

Exacerbating this situation is the failure of adults in the school environment to vie for Sonia's and Andrea's attention. Five out of six of Sonia's teachers disregard her frequent absences, and have given up trying to convince her to do her homework. Even Sonia's favorite teacher has no idea of her interest in Sureno gangs. In turn, Andrea's teachers, who generally ignore her, do not realize that the source of her quiet demeanor goes beyond their stereotypes of the quiet, compliant Asian student. Rather, Andrea explains that "In a class where there's no Vietnamese, I don't like to talk American. Because - I don't know why - I can't talk to a girl because maybe I'm not one of them." (EX48STB: 1251-1262) and complains about her teachers' lack of interest in her education:

> Some of my teachers, like I got 'Ds' and they don't even ask. They don't even care because the [number] one is American. I mean [American] students, they ask them 'how are you doing?' and all. That's stupid, you know?! Why don't you ever ask me that? They just ask Americans. (EX48STEN: 1492-1498)

At the most basic level, then, neither Sonia nor Andrea feel that their teachers have an interest in who they are or how they do academically.

Furthermore, neither Sonia nor Andrea believe that teachers care about their heritage, let alone do anything to help them recognize that their heritage is part of American history. For example, Sonia believes that when a teacher does, on rare occasion, mention something relevant to those of Latino descent, it is to communicate negative statistics which are associated with her ethnicity:

> White teachers, some of them are kind of prejudiced ....It's probably the way they look at you, the way they talk, you know, when they're talking about something - like when they talk about the people who are going to drop out. And Mr. Kula, when he's talking about teenage pregnancy or something like that, he turns around and looks at us [Sonia and her Mexican female friends]. It's like, he tries to look around the whole room, so we won't notice, but like he mostly like tries to tell us, tries to get it through our heads you know. (EX56STB: 1884-1911)

Sonia and Andrea say that none of their teachers speak of possibilities, either for themselves or for other Vietnamese or Latino students. Nor do they highlight the positive aspects of their ethnic heritage.

Teaching practices further exacerbate Sonia and Andrea's isolation. Both are students in Explorer's general track. While Explorer has begun to detrack its English and social studies classrooms, they have done so without training teachers in techniques that are appropriate for heterogeneously grouped classrooms. For the most part, pedagogy remains teacher centered - students either listen to teachers and answer occasional questions, or do individual seat work at their desks. With more than 30 students per classroom, it is easy for teachers to ignore students like Sonia, who fail to complete their work, and who teachers perceive as less motivated and disrespectful of authority. Likewise, teachers may fail to recognize students like Andrea, who sit quietly in the classroom and do not challenge the teacher's practice. Students either choose to work, or drift towards academic failure.

In short, for youth like Sonia and Andrea, a defensive oppositional adaptation prohibits their social and, in some cases, academic interaction with the school. The hopelessness both feel about making it in the mainstream and the hostility they sense from those not of their ethnicity are heightened by negative experiences within their school environment.

Ethnicity as a Resource

While many youth conceive of their ethnicity as a fortress, others see it as a resource which enables their success in a what they see as a fundamentally racist society. Importantly, for these students, aspects of their ethnic self are never absent from words and actions, that is the student does not shift completely from one system of meaning to another. Rather, these youth move across varied cultural settings, thrusting their ethnic selves forward to varying degrees depending on the context. Some show a remarkable tolerance for cultural contradictions, managing to draw from varied systems of meaning to join together old things in new ways. For these students, ethnicity is constantly flowing. They see boundaries between cultural groups as permeable, given that conditions within school contexts are amenable.

Johnnie Betts

Johnnie, an African-American sophomore at Huntington High School, has moved back and forth over the years between an African-American inner-city neighborhood in St. Louis and a residential middle-class neighborhood in California. In California, Johnnie is successful both academically and socially. He participates with ease in classrooms, mixing white and black modes of expression. Out of the classroom, Johnnie interacts with a predominantly African-American peer group, but flows easily among Mexican and white students as well.

Johnnie conceives of his ethnicity as a valuable source of strength and pride. He cultivates his identity as an African-American male who can beat the statistics without sacrificing his culture:

> My thing is just to get out of high school alive....I mean like, it's hard to go to school, to make it. black kids, usually they drop out. A lot of them don't make it, a lot of them do. And I want to be one of them that makes it. And a lot of them die because there's a lot of killing between blacks and blacks. When I say alive, I mean alive. Just that. (HT27STEN: 326-340)

> I don't want to be a sellout....like a person, could be like a white person turning black, or it could be a Chinese person turning white, could be a black person trying to be white....you can sell out to a lot of stuff. You can sell out to drugs or anything. But what I'm talking about is like race and color. I mean, I wouldn't do that. (HT27STEN: 114-135)

Johnnie's goal is to maintain his black identity and to succeed academically. He wants to "make it," but not at the expense of submerging or hiding his ethnic self.

Aspects of Johnnie's ethnic self are ever present in his academic and social interactions. He is often the only African-American male in his general track classes (only 5 percent of Huntington's population is African-American). Yet, he asserts rather than hides his heritage, moving just far enough into mainstream English and behavior to suit his various teachers. His classroom language is a blend of white and black English grammatical patterns, sprinkled with words from the African-American community. In classrooms where students are allowed freedom of expression, he raps and casts verbal jibes at his friends. Johnnie makes no attempt to talk or to behave white, either by shifting into mainstream English, or by sitting quietly at his desk.

At lunch time and while in the halls, Johnnie spends time with fellow African-American males, using black English almost exclusively. At the same time he mixes with Mexican-American and white peers. He chooses clothing styles preferred by his African-American friends, carries his school books prominently and speaks openly and with pride of his academic success.

Johnnie's cultural blending works well for him in the context of Huntington High School. When he moved from St. Louis, he had completed the seventh grade with D

and F grades. In the Montevideo school district, administrators advanced him to ninth grade remedial ("progress") classes designed for students who come into high school below grade level, where he made the school's honor role. In tenth grade, he was moved to the general track, where he earned a 2.17 GPA during the first semester of his sophomore year.

Marbella Sanchez

Marbella, a Mexican immigrant sophomore at Explorer High School, is a student who, like Johnnie, conceives of her ethnicity as a source of strength and power. Marbella spent the first 15 years of her life in a small city in Mexico, moving to the United States in the summer 1989 after her mother married an American. In her English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, she is largely separated from her white and bilingual Mexican-American peers. Yet, even within these classrooms, she works hard to combine Spanish and English, and stands out as academically successful. With her Mexican immigrant friends and family, Marbella speaks Spanish, listens to Mexican music, and discusses American and Mexican political and social problems. Above all, Marbella is flexible, able to adjust to both competitive and cooperative classroom atmospheres and to move through an alien school system where many of her teachers and Mexican peers expect her to fail.

Marbella conceives of her ethnic self as an integral resource which gives her the strength necessary to "become someone" despite negative expectations:

> ....well, a Mexican is someone who knows how to depend on himself. And he has to have a different character from other people. (HOW IS THAT?) Well, it's a - it's a strong character. It doesn't let itself get vanquished very easily. For example, if he says 'I am going to be a doctor' and another person, or other people say to him 'No, don't do that because it's a very long path, very complicated' or something, well, he mustn't let himself be discouraged by

> what they say. If he wants to study that, he has to do that. And not because the other people told him no, don't do that. (EX56STEN: 654-672)

To Marbella being Mexican means having the strength of character that will enable her to succeed in a new society. Negative comments only stir her to additional effort:

> It's like a bet to be here. It's like a bet that we ought to win because we need to demonstrate to other people that we indeed can make it. That is not because we are Latinos we can't make it.
>
> Except that there are times that it gives you more strength to be Latino than American. Because, it could be, at times they are treating you badly, no? Then you say inside of yourself 'I am going to demonstrate to those [people] that I indeed can be something, and that...I have the capability to be something. It's not because I'm Latino that I can't make it.' Then, at these times, they give you desire to study more and, then become someone more quickly, so as to demonstrate to all the world that it is not because you are Mexican you are going to stop below. Or because you don't speak English or something. (EX50STEN, 441-463)

Marbella defines her ethnic identity in oppositional terms which require school success. Achor and Morales (1990) have identified a similar pattern among Chicanas holding doctoral degrees, where "negative messages casting doubts on the abilities of persons of their ethnicity and gender to succeed served not as an impeder, but as an impetus to prove the messages wrong." (p. 280-1)

Marbella's view of her ethnicity affects both her academic and her social behavior at Explorer High School. An excellent student, Marbella earns straight As and Bs in her English as a Second Language classes. She attends her classes, does her homework, and works hard to learn English:

> In the majority of my classes, I really like to participate. At times they ask you something, and I know it....at times I don't make myself very well understood because the teachers don't speak Spanish. Well, I say it as well as I can, but at times not very well. But I really like to participate. (EX50STC: 240-258)

At the same time, Marbella and her close friends - who also do well in school - refuse to speak English on Tuesdays and Thursdays so that they can maintain their language and assert their right to speak Spanish at school. By asserting themselves both academically and culturally, Marbella and her friends challenge those who predict their failure.

Institutional Support and Empowering Teachers: Enabling Ethnicity to Flow

While Johnnie and Marbella attend different high schools, both resist and challenge forms of behavior considered conventional either by their peers or the dominant society. A central difference between these students and those mentioned previously lies in their school experiences - their interaction with the school context. Both identify factors which make it difficult for them to move as well as factors which enable them to be bend and shape their ethnic selves.

With regard to school context, both Johnnie and Marbella say that peer culture matters. Johnnie, for example, describes his friends in St. Louis as rejecting schooling, celebrating suspensions and ostracizing peers who tried academically:

> Kids that went to school there are suckers man....they were stupid for going cause most of the kids who were into school and stuff got jumped. They got beat up or something like that. (HT27STB: 1473-1480)

Within this middle school environment, Johnnie conformed to patterns of interaction that excluded pro-academic behavior.

In contrast, the behavior and norms among Johnnie's African-American peers at Huntington allow him to be creative. For example, Johnnie's academic achievement and transition to the general academic track have not been politically charged; his African-American friends do not accuse him of selling out. Furthermore, Johnnie tells us that he experiences Huntington's ethnic boundaries fluidly:

> ...everybody's together here. I mean, like, the Chinese kids or something, they'll like hang by themselves, they don't associate. But everybody else, the Mexicans, white kids, black kids, anybody, they all hang together. So at lunch they're all together. That's pretty good because nobody really shuts you out here. (HT27STA: 472-485)

In the context of Huntington High School, Johnnie feels there is room to be creative with his ethnicity, that success does not require "selling out" to the dominant culture.

Johnnie's experience also points to important classroom features (with structural implications for schools) that enable and encourage his movement. At Huntington, progress class teachers are better able to support academically low achieving students because class size averages around 20 students (due to attrition rather than planning). Teachers take advantage of reduced class size to personally encourage students to move up and out of the remedial track.[4]

In contrast to Johnnie, Marbella and her friends feel hostility and disdain from their white peers. In addition, they must also contend with other Mexican students who criticize Marbella's small peer group for their pro-academic orientation. These students view academic failure as a more appropriate response to the racism they feel in school. As a result, Marbella has only a few friends who define their ethnicity in similar terms:

> Well, I have only a few friends...We are always together because we share the same ideas, for example, we don't use bad words when we talk...Also, they [other Mexican-American women] invite us to leave school early [cut class] with them...I only have three that really understand me, and the other one's don't and we usually fight. They said I am crazy. And not too many talk to me any more. (EX50STB: 270-302)

> ...it depends on who you associate with, who you hang out with. Like my friends, they think that a Mexican is someone who goes forward, someone who becomes someone, who has a career and can triumph in a country not his own.....And this, they also think that to be Mexican is something that...you can value yourself, can become someone by yourself and not with the help of another person. (EX56STEN: 570-584, 597-602)

Furthermore, Marbella does not mix with her white peers, who she feels view her as an intruder, because "they try to humiliate us." (EX50STA: 401-405) For Marbella, fighting subordination and moving across cultural boundaries is not easy in an environment where many have internalized negative messages about what it means to be Mexican.

At the classroom level, both Marbella and Johnnie speak vehemently against teachers who project the attitude that they can not succeed. Johnnie, for example, speaks adamantly both of the realities of St. Louis' local economy and the important role his teachers played in communicating its' hopelessness:

> Strict teachers in St. Louis, that's their main object, to tell you that you're lower than trash, you're nothin'....they just like 'whatever...whatever you want to do.' Cause they know in St. Louis growing up as a young teen you don't do nothing no way because that's really how it is. Can't get a job. No good jobs there. (HT27STB: 1448-1463)

Marbella, too, speaks angrily against teachers who lower their expectations because she speaks little English.

Marbella and Johnnie compare negative experiences with teachers to positive encounters that have encouraged them to be creative with their ethnic identities. Most important, they say, are teachers who encourage them to resist statistics:

> Marbella: Well, he speaks to us completely in English, but he explains his class very well....And he tells us that as Hispanics, we can get very far....and that we need to work very hard in our class to become someone, if we want to do it....he's a good person. He's on good terms with us. He tells us at times that he would perhaps like to be Mexican because, well, we want to be someone in this country. He tells us that many times people who are born here and who know English don't make use of it, and that we who at times don't know it, we make use of it. (EX56STEN: 53-61)

> Johnnie: [My teachers] expect me to graduate, and go to college and to be something....they say something like 'I want you to do good this year so you can pass my class so you can go into a higher class and so you won't be back here'....Miss Ashton, she'll go all off on the board and she'll tell you, you know, 'If you think you can't even spell this word, think you're going to go in the English class next year?' And then she'll say, well, she'll talk to you. She

> won't put you down. She'll talk to you and she'll go 'Yeah, you know I love you. You know I want you to make something out of yourself, so stop messing around in my class. (HT27STB: 1470-1537)

Marbella reports, as well, that some of her teachers have discussed how she might prepare for college in the United States. Both she and Johnnie say that it is important for teachers to encourage them to defy statistics, and for teachers to show that they care about their students doing so. Their comments support other research which argues that the establishment of a caring relationship between students and adults is an important element in reversing trends of underachievement. (McLaughlin et al. 1990; Phelan et al. 1991; Trueba 1988)

Marbella and Johnnie also praise teachers who allow their ethnic voices and experiences to be incorporated into the classroom. This response does not require teachers to change their classrooms to "match" the culture of the children. For example, both Johnnie and Marbella laud middle-class whites who do not have an intimate knowledge of their students' cultures. These teachers' respect for, validation of and willingness to cross into their students' social worlds and demand their attention are important.

Finally, Marbella orients towards teachers who challenge negative stereotypes and encourage a more complex view of cultural and national differences:

> ...we were speaking with Mr. Vargas, he is [describes himself as an] American and I am Mexican and we were questioning him about that, about why. Later, he says that we are all equal, no? Because we are all brothers, no? We are all equal. But it's the thinking of each person, the thinking of each person that sometimes says you are poor, you are not equal to me because I am rich. Or you are Mexican and I am American; I am better than you. And, that exists, and, well, it shouldn't exist because we are all equal. (EX56STEN: 727-744)

By allowing his students to question his choices, and by questioning the messages that Marbella and her friends receive about groups in their new school environment, Mr. Vargas supports Marbella's efforts to present an alternative ethnic identity. Marbella's comments support another line of research, which argues that educators could fruitfully apply "cultural therapy" to help increase their students' awareness of how their and other's positions in a group can limit vision and understanding and generate feelings of deficit or superiority. (Spindler & Spindler 1989)

Ethnicity as a Place

Many academically successful youth of color do not find themselves in Johnnie's and Marbella's relatively positive situations. A third pattern we have uncovered describes those students who conform to mainstream patterns of interaction, their ethnic voices disappearing in the process. These youth think of or practice their ethnicity as a place, presenting their ethnic identity only within clearly defined social spaces.

Ivonne Chavez

Ivonne, a Mexican/Cuban-American sophomore at Huntington High School, moves between two sociocultural worlds. At home and during her free time at school, Ivonne spends time with her family and Mexican peers, speaking Spanish and English. However, Ivonne's Mexican peer group at school is dwindling since many of these friends and her older siblings have dropped out of high school. Ivonne's talk with her Mexican friends centers around neighborhood rumors and boys. School is rarely discussed. Ivonne says that she feels most comfortable around these friends, because their values are similar to her own.

During school, Ivonne moves into high track classes dominated by white and Asian students. She is the only transported Latina female from her sophomore class enrolled

across Huntington's advanced classes. While she has in-class friends, she does not spend time with them outside of the classroom. Ivonne's conversations with her class friends center on school: how to get on a teacher's good side, what needs to be done to prepare for the SAT, how to best complete a homework assignment, teacher characteristics and personalities. Grades on assignments are often compared.

Like Marbella, Ivonne conceives of her ethnicity primarily in terms which are oppositional to others' low expectations. When asked how she feels about her heritage, she replies:

> Well, I'm proud of it. I feel that, you know, that Latins aren't stupid. I'd like to be one of them that could achieve something. Cause most people think that Latins aren't - you know, that they can't do nothing, that they're just going to become like in the lower class. And, I think that that's not true. I think that everybody's the same. You can do anything you want to. (HT28STEN: 125-136)

Like Marbella, achieving academically is a strategy Ivonne uses to prove what she knows by experience - that Latino people "aren't stupid."

However, unlike Marbella and Johnnie, Ivonne does not equate aspects of her Mexican self with her academic success, nor does she reveal her ethnic self in the classroom. While Ivonne believes that "you can work among white people without being white," (HT28STEN: 809-815) she leaves her ethnic self outside the classroom door, conforming to white middle class norms of classroom interaction and behavior. In Ivonne's case these include speaking white ("standard") English, working individually, and divorcing her personal experience from the classroom. For example, while Ivonne will talk about her home life outside of the classroom, her conversations with her classroom peers focus only on academic matters. The one behavior Ivonne does not adopt is the competition for the floor that characterizes many high-achieving classrooms.

Most of the time she is quiet, rarely expressing her opinions. One teacher describes her as a student easily overlooked, "she doesn't stand out - either as a nuisance or as a top student." (HT076ST1: 38-41)

Outside the classroom door, Ivonne releases the hold on her ethnic self, pushing her ethnic identity to the fore. Here, she resembles Johnnie and Marbella in her creativeness with her ethnicity. She uses barrio English - inserting "Mexican words, if Spanish goes real well" (HT52STEN: 572-574) into English phrases and filling her speech with ain't, she don't think, and can't do nothing and readily expressing her opinion on a wide range of issues. She cheers for the San Francisco 49ers and likes to go to malls, yet watches Spanish soap operas with her father and sells 'churros' at the local flea market on the weekends. While she is well informed about how to become a doctor, she is equally informed about neighborhood gossip and local gang politics.

Like Johnnie, Ivonne crosses boundaries between ethnic groups relatively easily. She does not feel that she is rejecting her ethnic identity by participating in advanced classes and she is encouraged by her peers and family to maintain her high academic achievement. Ivonne's behavioral shifts and conformity to classroom norms has helped her succeed in a highly competitive environment. She earned a 4.0 GPA during her freshman year and 3.5 GPA during the first semester of her sophomore year. Yet the constant fear of failure makes Ivonne's ethnic voice quaver in a school environment where she "feels" the force of negative expectations and the power of institutional sorting forces.

Trinh Le

Trinh Le, a Vietnamese sophomore at Huntington High School, not only hides elements of her ethnic self while in the classroom, but also while with her close friends.

Her flawless English, diverse group of high achieving friends (none Vietnamese) and conformity to the norms and values of her white peers indicate that her transition to the high-achieving American teen scene has been complete. However, at home Trinh's ethnic self comes to the fore. Her parents encourage her to speak Vietnamese, to respect their authority, to get good grades, to help around the house, and to not date. Trinh obeys their wishes: for example, since the seventh grade, she has maintained a perfect 4.0 GPA in advanced classes.

Trinh, who moved to the United States when she was three months old, conceives of her ethnicity as a constellation of linguistic skills and cultural knowledge. These things exist in Vietnam and in her parents, rather than herself:

> They [my parents] want me to be like, you know, talk Vietnamese and everything. And they like [my] being more Vietnamese....I don't really consider myself Vietnamese because I don't speak it, and than I was raised here, so that's different. (HT30STEN: 20-47)

While Trinh can understand and speaks limited Vietnamese, she is not fluent in the language. Believing that her ethnic self hinges on the command of her parent's native tongue and on a familiarity with Vietnam, she is left uncertain as to who she is:

> I don't know, I don't really think I'm American or Vietnamese, you know. Some American people, they have the same values as I do and stuff, and it isn't like they're 'American' or anything. And then I don't really consider like because you're Vietnamese, you have certain values or anything. It comes from you and your parents and what you believe in. (HT30STEN: 1081-1101)

It seems as if Trinh attempts to divorce ethnicity from her conception of self.

Yet, other comments made by Trinh indicate that she can not fully do this, as she is keenly aware of the cultural differences between her home and school worlds, and fears that these differences will cause her peers to ridicule her:

> [At open house] if they [our parents] know our friends [parents] are Vietnamese, you know - they might speak Vietnamese together and stuff, or they might embarrass us, you know. And then they'd [friends] ask a lot of questions... I don't bring my friends to my house either. (HT30STB: 1271-1281)

In order to cross the boundary Trinh perceives between her home and school worlds, she has severed the more prominent aspects of her ethnicity from her school self - acknowledging that she understands Vietnamese or interacting with other Vietnamese peers. Trinh rarely invites her friends to her home, and tries to keep her parents out of her school world as well. At the same time, she seeks friends whose values overlap those she perceives as integral to her home culture: respect for authority and education.

Fear and Isolation: Ebbing The Flow of Ethnicity

Both Ivonne and Trinh have been extremely successful in highly competitive classroom environments. Yet, their tight control over their ethnic selves does little to add to the richness of classrooms, to challenge stereotypic portraits of ethnic groups, to convey alternate points of view, or to question the logic of the standard classroom system. How have Ivonne and Trinh's school and classroom experiences made conformity an unquestioned matter of academic or emotional survival?

Certainly, conformity is fostered by past and current school experiences of isolation. Trinh, for example, was part of the first wave of Vietnamese immigrants to arrive in the United States where she attended a school with no Vietnamese peers. Because of her isolation, she quickly adopted the patterns of speech and behaviors of her majority peers. As later waves of immigrants arrived, Trinh, reluctant to release or threaten her grasp on acquired friendships and cultural patterns, has retained her Americanized school behavior and does not interact with her less acculturated peers. She still feels her isolation:

> I notice like the little things like more than other people, you know?....Like little old things. Okay, everyone in the class, you know? I know their name and everything....Well, like the thing is like being like Vietnamese, it's kind of like they've let a lot of Americans in here [the high track classrooms], that they're [Vietnamese] more alone, and then when you're alone you're nervous, like little old things, more than like [other people.] (HT30STEN: 1214-1242)

Ivonne has also become more isolated but for different reasons than Trinh. In her case, her Mexican female friends have dropped away from her classes over time. Ivonne's quiet demeanor results, in part, from her perception of being alone as well as her assessment of teachers' view of Latino students:

> They probably don't expect us to get as high. They probably expect a lot of us to drop out, not to graduate. I think they expect more of us to have babies....
>
> HAVE PEOPLE SAID OR DONE ANYTHING TO MAKE YOU FEEL THAT WAY?
>
> No....but no, I don't know. You just feel it. Feel it. (HT28STEN: 873-883)

As a result, Ivonne, like Trinh, frequently conforms, rather than challenges the dominant society's conceptions of her background.

Likewise, conformity is a means of avoiding criticism from other students for not adapting to white middle class patterns of interaction. Trinh is extremely cognizant of her high-achieving peers' view of other languages:

> Like this person, I don't know, they were talking about how some Vietnamese like people who just came here. They don't really like them because they can't relate, adapt to the new culture. And I was just like thinking that it's hard for them you know to do it, because everything's new and they can't just like learn a new language just like that and everything....I was kind of mad when they said that. But I didn't really say anything you know, but I don't know. I mean it's kind of true that - because it depends on how long they've been here, because some of them - I understand that they don't want to learn English, well they seem like it because like they just hang around with Vietnamese and they just talk Vietnamese and they don't want to like adapt. (HT30STEN: 890-930)

While other languages and dialects are heard in Huntington's general track classrooms, "standard" English is the only language used in advanced classrooms - even among students with similar ethnic backgrounds.

Ivonne and Trinh's classroom experiences are similar to those of Andrea and Sonia's in that their teachers do little to help them recognize that their language and heritage are part of, rather than adjacent to, American society. Course content emphasizes prominent Western peoples and industrialized nations. Further, works by authors of color have not been included in the curriculum. Ivonne and Trinh have responded to this deficit differently than Sonia and Andrea. Their sense of ethnicity as a place, developed out of fear and isolation, implies that what they will find in the classroom will be very different from what they find at home and that they must adapt to survive. We believe that this absence may further exacerbate Trinh's and Ivonne's tendency to divorce their experiences at home from their experiences within school, and may be as painful for them as it is for students like Sonia and Andrea. Indeed, as Eisner (1985:97) has pointed out, "what schools do not teach (the 'null curriculum') may be as important as what they do teach... ignorance is not a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problem."

IV. A Summing Up

This study considers whether ethnicity is a social construction that is constantly being recreated in a nexus of shifting social relations, rather than a set of perceptions and/or behaviors which remain constant and stem from a youth's membership in an ethnic group. This work supports the view that what happens in schools does, in fact, affect youths' sense

of their ethnic self and identity. But what evidence do we have that youth of color do not simply import their conceptions of ethnicity?

For one, students like Johnnie, who describe dramatic changes in their sense of ethnicity that grow out of their experiences in different school environments, appear to strongly challenge ethnicity as a static concept. If Johnnie had been told to tone down his use of "street slang," would he have reacted so positively to Huntington High School? Second, students like Ivonne and Trinh describe a constantly moving ethnic self which they must submerge as they negotiate success in their high track classrooms. Finally, all of the students vividly describe school experiences which affect how they define their ethnic self and identity. In other words, meanings are constantly being renegotiated as students interact with teachers and peers in classroom and school environments.

For example, for youth like Sonia and Andrea, who experience their ethnicity as a fortress, ethnic self-definitions are both defensive and circumscribing. Such students describe instances of insensitivity or hostility from teachers and other students which devalue their background. Furthermore, neither has had a significant relationship with any adult in their school setting which could pull them into the academic realm. We have watched these students' desire to engage in schooling dampen steadily over time.

Contrasting the experiences of youth who experience ethnicity as a fortress with youth who experience ethnicity as a resource illustrates that an oppositional ethnic identity can evolve into forms which are not necessarily negative and/or detrimental to academic success. For example, Johnnie tells us that teachers who recognize the force of social and political inequalities and at the same time help him acquire strategies to resist negative statistics play a central role in his redefinition of ethnic self and identity. Additionally, Marbella tells us that some teachers and peers have supported her efforts to maintain a

positive and oppositional ethnic identity while others have not, causing her to have to constantly reconsider the meaning of her ethnicity.

Finally, youth who experience their ethnicity as a place, such as Ivonne and Trinh, switch daily between social worlds. For these youth, presentation of self changes constantly, as they respond to the varied demands of their community and school. They tell us that their isolation within high track classrooms and their peers' lack of sensitivity to cultural differences forces them to assess each situation in order to determine the extent to which they can safely reveal their ethnic selves.

Our research indicates that youth experience their ethnicity in a variety of patterns which transcend ethnic boundaries and reflect relations at school as well as relations at home and in the wider historical and socioeconomic community. Perhaps most important, this research suggests that teachers can work positively with youth who experience racism, can help them resist negative societal meanings attached to cultural differences and can nurture critical and engaged student voices. Because ethnic meanings are not static but rather constantly negotiated, teachers and schools have an opportunity to play an important role in the conceptions of ethnicity which are created. Our hope is that educators will work with students to build environments which enable students to view their ethnicity as a resource and which empower rather than impede their participation in the social and academic realms of the school.

Notes

1. The Students' Multiple Worlds study includes 54 students from four diverse high school settings in two California school districts. Students vary on a number of dimensions, including gender, ethnicity, achievement level, immigrant history and transportation status. An equal number of high and low-achieving students were selected from each school and both minority and majority students are included in the two achievement categories.

2. Here and elsewhere, quotations are identified by file code. These interviews are part of a public-use file which will be made available to interested researchers at the end of the CRC grant period.

3. District transportation policy allows students to rank the schools that they prefer to attend. As word has travelled through the Latino adolescent community about Explorer High School, Nortenos have stopped indicating it as one of their preferences.

4. While our sample is by no means representative, 5 out of 7 students who began our study in a progress English class moved into the general track after their freshman year. This stands in contrast to many high schools, where it is difficult or impossible to move to another academic track.

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